

Dedicated Military Man Oliver North Was Not One to Act Without Approval

STAT

By JOHN WALCOTT

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—No one worked harder for Ronald Reagan or believed in him more passionately than Oliver North, the once obscure Marine lieutenant colonel who now stands accused of masterminding the worst scandal of the Reagan presidency.

Lt. Col. North's dedication to his job was boundless: He routinely worked from before seven in the morning until 10 or 11 at night, once worked 40 consecutive weekends, and took his first vacation in five years last August. But even so, his former colleagues say, it seems inconceivable that Lt. Col. North and his staff of two aides and two secretaries singlehandedly and without



Oliver North

the approval of their superiors diverted more than \$10 million from Iranian arms sales to Nicaraguan rebels.

Although he's silent now, Lt. Col. North in the past always insisted: "I've never acted without the approval of my superiors."

Typically, when it occurred to Lt. Col. North a year ago that U.S. planes could intercept the jetliner carrying the terrorists who had hijacked the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* and murdered a passenger, the first thing he did was tell his idea to his boss at the National Security Council, Vice Adm. John Poindexter. When Vice Adm. Poindexter told him to proceed, the next thing Lt. Col. North did was to consult the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

'Ollie Does What He Is Told'

"Ollie does what he is told to do," affirms career diplomat Robert Oakley, who with Lt. Col. North helped direct the administration's counterterrorism policy for the past two years. "Ollie North doesn't make up his own orders," agrees a senior White House foreign policy adviser who worked closely with Lt. Col. North.

But Lt. Col. North's orders were as unconventional as his background, and his creativity in carrying them out helped get him into trouble, his former associates in the White House, the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department agree.

According to senior administration officials, when Congress ordered a halt to U.S. support for anti-communist rebels in Nicaragua, Robert McFarlane, then the national security adviser, directed Lt. Col. North to keep the Contras armed, financed, and afloat—without involving the U.S. government.

He did so, administration officials say, by helping to establish and coordinate a network of private donors, arms dealers and foreign governments to take up the slack as the U.S. halted support for the Contras.

Although he is a passionate supporter of the rebel cause and an admirer of Adolfo Calero and other Contra leaders, he reportedly never told the rebels where much of their help was coming from. Indeed, Contra leaders say they were led to believe that Saudi Arabia had contributed heavily to their cause, although senior Saudi officials deny that, and it now appears that much of the money actually was diverted from U.S. and Israeli arms sales to Iran.

His Role Draws Accusations

Lt. Col. North's role in keeping the Contras going attracted a welter of accusations about possibly illegal activities in the past, but he has insisted that former White House counsel Fred Fielding and other administration lawyers had taken pains to ensure that everything he did stayed within the letter, if not the spirit, of congressional restrictions on American aid to the Contras.

Lt. Col. North and some of his colleagues directly challenged some of the charges leveled against them this fall, however. He charged, for example, that Nicaraguan and Cuban intelligence officials may have fabricated and planted records of telephone calls to his private White House number from a safe house in El Salvador used by mercenaries flying supplies to the Contras. As evidence, he points out that the unlisted number in the El Salvadoran phone company records wasn't given to him until after the alleged calls were made.

Congressional Probe Seen Likely

Yesterday's disclosures are far more startling, however, and they seem likely to revive congressional probes into U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan rebels.

According to other current and former administration officials, Mr. McFarlane and his successor, Vice Adm. Poindexter, also directed Lt. Col. North to help oversee covert aid to anti-communist rebels in Afghanistan and to work with the CIA in locating and freeing the American hostages in Lebanon.

Before the administration opened the Iran connection 18 months ago, Lt. Col. North made a number of secret trips to Europe and the Middle East, often in disguise and using a false name, explaining that his mission was "to bring Americans home from faraway places."

When President Reagan personally approved the secret attempt to improve relations with Iran 18 months ago, senior officials say, Mr. McFarlane turned to Lt. Col. North to begin a dialogue with the Iranians.

Lt. Col. North approached these and other delicate tasks with zeal and originality, and with too much of both for many of his colleagues in the military and the foreign service.

Didn't Hesitate to Use Power

He didn't hesitate to use the power that came to him from sitting close to the president, and that often rubbed his nominal superiors in the military the wrong way. They called him "the world's highest-ranking lieutenant colonel," although that title might better belong to Mr. McFarlane, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel.

Earlier this year, when the subject of Lt. Col. North's eventual return to the Marine Corps arose at an NSC staff meeting, Vice Adm. Poindexter said what by then had become obvious to everyone. "The Marine Corps doesn't want Ollie back," said Vice Adm. Poindexter, according to officials who were present.

But at the Pentagon, too, officials yesterday expressed doubt that Lt. Col. North has been freelancing.

"North might be a scapegoat," said one Pentagon official. "It's kind of hard to believe that he was doing all these things on his own. He was a professional soldier and a well-trained one."

Tart Tongue, Flippant Manner

Still, Lt. Col. North's tart tongue and occasionally flippant manner sometimes added to the impression that, at the age of 43, some of his power had gone to his head.

At a meeting Sept. 9, after the president had returned from a California vacation, Mr. Reagan asked why there suddenly had been a resurgence of terrorism. "The terrorists all finished their vacations on the Riviera, too," Lt. Col. North replied, according to an official who attended the meeting.

But Lt. Col. North was, if anything, too passionate in his pursuit of the president's objectives, both in supporting the Nicaraguan rebels and in trying to win the freedom of the hostages in Lebanon.

'His Immediate Objective'

"Ollie thinks in terms of his immediate objective," says an official who worked closely with him. "It's not his nature to think about the broader implications of what he's doing."

For example, says one senior official, intercepting the Achille Lauro hijackers was a military and counterterrorism success, but it strained relations with the Italians, who weren't warned in advance that the hijackers' plane would be forced down at a NATO base in Sicily.

But in the cases of Iran and Central America, several senior administration officials say, Lt. Col. North deliberately was left on his own because his superiors wanted to keep their hands, and those of the president, clean.

"He was ordered not to tell anybody else what he was doing, and not to listen to anybody else," says one senior official.

Yesterday, the president and the top officials he served so zealously abruptly deserted him. His military career is over. He faces continuing investigations, and perhaps even criminal charges.